The Effects of Individual Factors, Family Factors and Underclass Neighborhood Residence on Male Juvenile Delinquency*

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*This paper is based on the author's dissertation, "Working Against the Odds: Parents, Neighborhoods and Juvenile Delinquency," Graduate School of Social Work, University of Pittsburgh, August 1991.

Statement of the research problem

Any attempt to explain ethnic differences in delinquent behavior is to tread in controversial waters. Researchers avoid the subject of ethnicity primarily because of its socially and politically sensitive nature. When African Americans are studied apart from the communities in which they live -- i.e., when individual African Americans are compared to individual whites -- they will inevitably look "worse" on almost any outcome measure (Wilson, 1987). Individual-level studies have shown that African American youths are over-represented in all categories of crime (Gray-Ray and Ray, 1990). In both official studies (arrests and/or court referrals) and self-report studies, they are the more frequent, serious offenders (Elliot and Ageton, 1980). Empirical studies of juvenile delinquency have been of two general types, individual-level and social/ecological-level studies. With the advent of self-report surveys, individual studies have dominated the field. In this type, the individual is the unit of analysis and explanations for delinquency are sought at the individual or family level. Individual studies have documented strong relationships between family functioning, particularly the supervision and monitoring of children's activities, and delinquent behavior (Loeber and Stouthamer-Loeber, 1986). Association with delinquent peers is another documented correlate of delinquency which may have even stronger effects on delinquency than the family (Jensen, 1972; Fagan and Wexler, 1987). Weaker correlates of delinquent behavior are single-parent homes and low SES. Rarely, however, do individual studies account for the communities in which individuals and families live; such studies are frequently "context-less". The "buck stops" at the family's door.

In the second type of study, the unit of analysis is a census tract, neighborhood, city or larger geographic area and researchers seeks explanations for rates of delinquency in the physical or social communities in which offenders live. The classic study of this type is the Chicago study conducted by Shaw and McKay (1972). They found that high rates of official delinquents were concentrated in those areas located near the center of the city, areas into which newly arrived immigrant groups moved. These inner city areas remained quite stable over several decades in their delinquent rates despite a turnover in foreign-born and immigrant populations. As for the "Negro population," Shaw and McKay found that although African Americans had higher rates of official delinquents than other ethnic groups, these rates varied by area as well. Shaw and McKay's study -- and ecological studies in general -- are criticized for their reliance on official data and for their inability to assess the effects of community on individual behavior.

Research background questions/hypotheses

The present study is unusual in that it includes both known individual-level correlates of delinquency and a measure of neighborhood context. The major aim of this study was to examine ethnic differences in delinquency seriousness as a function of individual factors and

neighborhood context, *viz*, does neighborhood make a significant contribution to an explanation of serious delinquent behavior when competing individual-level factors are accounted for? The specific questions to be addressed in this paper are:

1. Are African American boys more seriously delinquent than white boys?
2. Are African American boys more seriously delinquent than white boys when they do not live in underclass neighborhoods?
3. When boys are divided into those who are well supervised by their parents and those who are less well supervised, are proportionately more boys in underclass neighborhoods seriously delinquent compared to boys in non-underclass neighborhoods?
4. When controlling for individual-level factors that have been shown to be related to juvenile delinquency (in addition to parental supervision), does residence in underclass neighborhoods still have a significant effect on boys' delinquency seriousness?

Methodology

Subjects. The subjects for this study were 506 Pittsburgh Public Schools boys who are the oldest of three grade cohorts (first, fourth and seventh grades) in an on-going longitudinal study. Names and addresses of all eligible boys were provided by the Board of Public Education. Boys were randomly selected for an initial screening in the spring of 1987 and 1988. 83.5% of the seventh grade boys and their parents agreed to participate (n=850). The boy, his primary caretaker (usually the mother), and his teacher were asked to report on the boy's prosocial and antisocial behavior. A risk score was calculated based on the boy's commission of potentially indictable offenses according to the three respondents. Using this risk score as a criterion, the final sample selected consisted of the 30% (n=250) with the highest risk scores and an equal number of randomly selected boys from the remainder (see Loeber et al., 1991). The sample is representative of the Pittsburgh Public School population in terms of racial distribution and academic achievement (Van Kammen et al., 1991).

Because the sample is a high-risk sample, the analyses reported here used weighted data, i.e., boys with higher risk scores were given less weight in the analyses than boys with lower risk scores. These data are based on the first wave of interviews after screening when the boys were in the beginning of their 8th grade school year.

Measures. Individual-level background measures included family structure (single-parent or two-parent) and family social status (welfare use). "Supervision of boy's outside activities" was a 5-item construct which combined the reports of the boy and his parent and "association with delinquent peers" consisted of 10 items asked of the boy only. Delinquency was measured with a five-level seriousness classification score based on the work of Wolfgang et al. (1985) and Stouthamer-Loeber et al. (in press). The levels ranged from no delinquency/minor delinquency in the home, minor delinquency outside of the home, moderately serious delinquency, serious delinquency and varied, serious delinquency. (See Appendix for descriptions of all measures.)

Pittsburgh is a city of neighborhoods, often visibly defined by geographic contours

(rivers, hills and gorges) and frequently containing distinct ethnic groups. While Pittsburgh has not "ghettoized" to the same extent as other large American cities, it is, according to the Department of City Planning's Pittsburgh Housing Study (PHS) among the more highly segregated cities in 1980 (PHS, 1991). The city's 88 neighborhoods, each composed of 1 to 7 census tracts, tend to be homogenous with respect to most social and demographic characteristics (PHS, 1991).

An index was developed to classify neighborhoods according to the degree to which they were "underclass." Based on the literature of the urban underclass, six census-based variables were entered into a principal components factor analysis and one factor was extracted which was labelled "underclass." It explained 76.9% of the common variance in public assistance, female-headed families, family poverty, families with no one employed, male joblessness and nonmarital births. Neighborhoods were then classified into "underclass" if the score was greater than one standard deviation above the factor score mean and "not underclass" if the factor score was less.

The neighborhoods for each of the boys in the study were identified based upon the boy's address at the time of the screening. 27 boys could not be classified.

While the term underclass is often applied to individuals (the drug dealer, the welfare recipient, the teenage mother), it is more appropriately a term to be applied to the socio-political and economic forces which have shaped and defined many of our African American urban neighborhoods. It is used here as a contextual variable.

Results

57.3% of the boys were African American; 36.2% of the families required income assistance (welfare); 46.6%% of the families had a single parent; and 23.9% of the families lived in Pittsburgh's poorest neighborhoods. 42.8% of the African American boys lived in underclass neighborhoods while only 1.5% (n=3) of the white boys lived in these neighborhoods.

When examined on an individual level and without benefit of other explanatory factors, African American boys were found to be more seriously delinquent than white boys ($X^2_{(4,482)}=18.45$, $p<.001$). This was especially true of the more serious offenses such as strongarming and robbery where 34.9% of the African American boys had committed serious offenses compared to 19.6% of the white boys. When African American boys did not live in underclass neighborhoods, however, they were more similar to the non-underclass neighborhood white boys ($X^2_{(4,370)}=7.32$). 19.8% of the white boys had committed serious offenses compared to 24.9% of the African American boys.

When boys were well supervised by their parents, 36.7% of boys who lived in underclass neighborhoods were seriously delinquent (levels 4 or 5) compared to 12.7% of those who lived in non-underclass neighborhoods. When boys were not well supervised, 54.4% of the boys who lived in underclass neighborhoods were seriously delinquent compared to 29.4% of those who did not. The relationship between neighborhood residence and delinquency seriousness was significant in both cases.

A multiple regression on delinquency seriousness of individual-level factors and neighborhood residence revealed that association with delinquent peers, poor parental supervision, age of youth, underclass neighborhood residence, and welfare use were

significant correlates. Single-parent homes and ethnicity were not significant. Overall, the model explained 24% of the variance in delinquency seriousness.

Utility for Social Work Practice

While some researchers have stressed the role of the family in delinquency at the expense of neighborhood and social structure, other researchers have stressed the role of social structure at the expense of the family. Both are relevant to delinquency policy. The assumption that families somehow raise their children independent of social context is what Currie called the "fallacy of autonomy" (1985). Policymakers must address both families and neighborhood and recognize that "what goes on inside the family [cannot] usefully be separated from the forces that affect it from the outside" (1985, p.185). Neighborhoods characterized by high rates of single-parent homes, for instance, are severely challenged in their efforts to effectively supervise youths. Neighborhoods with high rates of poverty face obstacles to organize at a community level due to the everyday pressures of surviving. Policies to control crime and delinquency must look beyond crime per se to support the economic and social structure of neighborhoods (Fagan, 1987).

Policies should include, at minimum, employment and family support components. Neighborhood programs should first and most importantly involve the residents, for it has been shown that community-led programs are more effective than traditional social service programs in mobilizing residents to prevent and intervene in crime (Fagan, 1987).

Neighborhood is, after all, a metaphor for the social, economic and political forces which have isolated a sizeable segment of the urban African American population. Neighborhood is a metaphor for housing discrimination and segregation, lack of access to real jobs, lack of access to good schools, and the povertization of women and children. While parents who are raising their children in underclass neighborhoods can and do make a difference, policies which enhance the social supports available to them and to their communities are needed.

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APPENDIX

Delinquency Seriousness Classification

Level 1: No delinquency or minor delinquency in the home (theft or vandalism)
Level 2: Other minor delinquency (minor theft, vandalism or fraud that occurred outside of the home)
Level 3: Moderately serious delinquency (theft of items over $5.00, carrying weapons, joyriding, or gangfighting)
Level 4: Serious delinquency (car theft, breaking and entering, strongarming, aggravated assault, forced sex, or selling drugs)
Level 5: Varied, serious delinquency (two or more different Level 4 acts)

Parental Supervision of Outside Activities

1. If parent is not at home, does son leave note or call to inform parent of whereabouts?
2. Does parent know son's companions when he is not at home?
3. When parent is not at home, does son know how to get in touch with parent?
4. When son is out, does parent know what time he will be home?
5. Is it important for parent to know what son is doing outside of the home? (asked of parent only)

Association with Delinquent Peers

Think of your friends. During the past six months, how many of them have...

1. Skipped school without an excuse?
2. Lied, disobeyed, or talked back to adults such as parents, teachers or others?
3. Purposely damaged or destroyed property that did not belong to them?
4. Stolen something worth less than $5?
5. Stolen something worth more than $5 but less than $100?
6. Stolen something worth more than $100?
7. Gone into or tried to go into a building to steal something?
8. Gone joyriding, that is, taken a motor vehicle such a car or motorcycle for a ride or drive without the owner's permission?
9. Hit someone with the idea of hurting that person?
10. Attacked someone with a weapon, force or strong-arm methods to get money or things from people?